

The state - an introduction - DRAFT



A brief introduction to what we at libcom.org mean when we refer to the state, or government, and how we think we should relate to it as workers. DRAFT; please let us know what you think of this article in the thread linked to below.

States come in many shapes and sizes. Democracies and dictatorships, those that provide lots of social welfare, those that provide none at all, some that allow for a lot of individual freedom and others that don't.

But these categories are not set in stone. Democracies and dictatorships rise and fall, welfare systems are set up and taken apart while civil liberties can be expanded or eroded.

However, all states share key features, which essentially define them.

What is the state?

All states have the same basic functions in that they are an organisation of all the [lawmaking](#) and [law enforcing](#) institutions within a specific territory.

So sometimes, a state will consist of a parliament with elected [politicians](#), a separate court system and a [police](#) force and military to enforce their decisions. At other times, all these functions are rolled into each other, like in military dictatorships for example.

But the ability within a given area to make political and legal decisions – and to enforce them, with violence if necessary – is the basic characteristic of all states. Crucially, the state claims a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence, within its territory and without. As such, the state is above the people it governs and all those within its territory are subject to it.

The state and capitalism

In a capitalist society, the success or failure of a state depends unsurprisingly on the success of [capitalism](#) within it.

Essentially, this means that within its territory profits are made so the economy can expand. The government can then take its share in taxation to fund its activities.

If businesses in a country are making healthy profits, investment will flow into profitable industries, companies will hire workers to turn their investment into more money. They and their workers will pay taxes on this money which keep the state running.



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But if profits dip, investment will flow elsewhere to regions where profits will be higher.

Companies will shut down, workers will be laid off, tax revenues will fall and local economies collapse.

So promoting profit and the growth of the economy is the key task of any state in capitalist society - including state capitalist economies which claim to be "socialist", like China or Cuba. *Read our introduction to capitalism here.*

The economy

As promoting the economy is a key task of the state, let's look at the fundamental building blocks of a healthy capitalist economy.

Workers

The primary need of a sound capitalist economy is the existence of a group of people able to work, to turn capitalists' money into more money: a working class. This requires the majority of the population to have been dispossessed

from the land and means of survival, so that the only way they can survive is by selling their ability to work to those who can buy it.

This dispossession has taken place over the past few hundred years across the world. In the early days of capitalism, factory owners had a major problem in getting peasants, who could produce enough to live from the land, to go and work in the factories. To solve this, the state violently forced the peasants off common land, passed laws forbidding vagrancy and forced them to work in factories under threat of execution.

Today, this has already happened to the vast majority of people around the world. However, in some places in the so-called "developing" world, the state still plays this role of displacing people to open new markets for investors. *Read our introduction to class [here](#).*

Property

A second fundamental requirement is the concept of private property. While many had to be dispossessed to create a working class, the ownership of land, buildings and factories by a small minority of the population could only be maintained by a body of organised violence -

a state. This is rarely mentioned by capitalism's advocates today, however in its early days it was openly acknowledged. As the liberal political economist Adam Smith wrote: Laws and government may be considered in this and indeed in every case as a combination of the rich to oppress the poor, and preserve to themselves the inequality of the goods which would otherwise be soon destroyed by the attacks of the poor, who if not hindered by the government would soon reduce the others to an equality with themselves by open violence.

This continues today, as laws deal primarily with protecting property rather than people. For example, it is not illegal for speculators to sit on food supplies, creating scarcity so prices go up while people starve to death, but it is illegal for starving people to steal food.

What does the state do?

Different states perform many different tasks, from providing free school meals to upholding religious orthodoxy. But as we mentioned above, the primary function of all states in a capitalist society is to protect and promote the economy

and the making of profit.

However, as businesses are in constant competition with each other, they can only look after their own immediate financial interests – sometimes damaging the wider economy. As such, the state must sometimes step in to look after the long-term interests of the economy as a whole.

So states educate and train the future workforce of their country and build infrastructure (railways, public transport systems etc) to get us to work and transport goods easily. States sometimes protect national businesses from international competition by taxing their goods when they come into the country or expand their markets internationally through wars and diplomacy with other states. Other times they give tax breaks and subsidies to industries, or sometimes bail them out entirely if they are too important to fail.

These measures sometimes clash with the interests of individual businesses or industries.

However, this doesn't change the fact that the state is acting in the interests of the economy as a whole. Indeed, it can be seen basically as a way to settle disputes among different capitalists about how to do it.

State welfare

Some states also provide many services which protect people from the worst effects of the economy. However, this has rarely, if ever, been the result of generosity from politicians but of pressure from below.

So for instance, after World War II, the UK saw the construction of the welfare state, providing healthcare, housing etc to those that needed it. However, this was because of fear amongst politicians that the end of the war would see the same revolutionary upheaval as after World War I with events like the Russian and German revolutions, the Biennio Rosso in Italy, the British army mutinies etc.

This fear was justified. Towards the end of the war, unrest amongst the working classes of the warring nations grew. Homeless returning soldiers took over empty houses while strikes and riots spread. Tory MP Quintin Hogg summed up the mood amongst politicians in 1943, saying

“if we don't give them reforms, they will give us revolution.”

This does not mean we oppose reforms as 'counter-revolutionary'. It just means that the state is not the engine for reform; we, the working class – and more specifically, our struggles –

are.

When our protests get to a point where they cannot be ignored or repressed anymore, the state steps in to grant reforms. We then end up spending the next 100 years hearing people go on about what a 'great reformer' so-and-so was, even though it was our protests which forced those reforms onto them.

When as a class we are organised and militant, social reforms are passed. But as militancy is repressed or fades away, our gains are chipped away at. Public services are cut and sold off bit-by-bit, welfare benefits are reduced, fees for services are introduced or increased and wages are cut.

As such, the amount of welfare and public service provision to the working class in a society basically marks the balance of power between bosses and workers. For example, the French working class has a higher level of organisation and militancy than the American working class. As a result, French workers also generally have better conditions at work, a shorter working week, earlier retirement and better social services (i.e. healthcare, education etc) -

regardless of whether there is a right or left wing government in power.

A workers' state?

For decades, in addition to the struggle in workplaces and the streets, many workers have tried to improve their conditions through the state.

The precise methods have differed depending on location and historical context but primarily have taken two main forms: setting up or supporting political parties which run for election

and are supposed to act in workers' interests, or more radically having the party seize political power and set up a workers' government through revolution. We will briefly examine two representative examples which demonstrate the futility of these tactics.

The Labour Party

The Labour Party in the UK was created by the trade unions in 1906. It soon adopted the stated aim of creating a socialist society.

However, faced with the realities of being in Parliament, and therefore the dependence on a healthy capitalist economy they quickly abandoned their principles and consistently supported anti-working class policies both in opposition and later in government .

From supporting the imperialist slaughter of World War I, to murdering workers abroad to maintain the British Empire, to slashing workers' wages to sending troops against striking dockers.

When the working class was on the offensive, Labour granted some reforms, as did the other parties. But, just like the other parties, when the working class retreated they eroded the reforms and attacked living standards. For example just a few years after the introduction of the free National Health Service Labour introduced prescription charges, then charges for glasses and false teeth.

As outlined, this was not because Labour Party members or officials were necessarily bad people but because at the end of the day they were politicians whose principle task was to keep the UK economy competitive in the global market.

The Bolsheviks

In Russia in 1917, when workers and peasants rose up and took over the factories and the land, the Bolsheviks argued for the setting up of a "revolutionary" workers' state. However, this state could not shake off its primary functions: as a violent defence of an elite, and attempting to develop and expand the economy to maintain itself.

The so-called "workers' state" turned against the working class: one-man management of factories was reinstated, strikes were outlawed and work became enforced at gunpoint. The state even liquidated those in its own quarters who disagreed with its new turn. Not long after the revolution, many of the original Bolsheviks had been executed by the government institutions they helped set up.

Against the state

All this does not mean that our problems would be solved if the state disappeared tomorrow.

It does mean, though, that the state is not detached from the basic conflict at the heart of capitalist society - that between the class of employers and employees. Indeed, it is part of it and firmly on the side of employers.

Whenever workers have fought for improvements in our conditions, we have come into conflict not just with our bosses but also the state, who have used the police, the courts, the prisons and sometimes even the military to keep things as they were.

And where workers have attempted to use the state, or even take it over to further our interests, they have failed - because the very nature of the state is inherently opposed to the working class. They only succeeded in legitimising and strengthening the state which later turned against them.

It is our collective power and willingness to disrupt the economy that gives us the possibility of changing society. When we force the state to grant reforms we don't just win better

conditions. Our actions point to a new society, based on a different set of principles. A society where our lives are more important than their 'economic growth'.

The state needs the economy to survive and so will always back those who control it. But the economy and the state are based on the work we do every day, and that gives us the power to disrupt them and eventually do away with them both.

More information

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Private property, exclusion and the state -Junge Linke - Brief article examining the role the state plays in capitalist society.

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The state: Its historical role - Peter Kropotkin - A classic anarchist text

examining the state's role in society.

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The state in capitalist society -Ralph Miliband -Excellent book analysing the nature of the state and how it cannot be used in workers' interests (not online unfortunately).

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Capital and the state -Gilles Dauvé - More detailed libertarian communist analysis of the state.

o

Marxism, freedom and the state - Mikhail Bakunin -A collection of writings of the Russian anarchist with comments on the state which were sadly proved accurate with the experiences of state socialist revolutions.

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The Bolsheviks and workers' control -Solidarity -A detailed examination of the anti-working class policies of the Bolsheviks in the earliest days of the Russian revolution.

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Labouring in vain -Subversion -A critical history of the Labour Party from a working-class perspective.